

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 IO-13 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01
INR-10 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15
ICA-11 OMB-01 TRSE-00 /080 W
-----020266 070419Z /41

R 061731Z APR 78
FM AMEMBASSY LONDON
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4875
INFO AMCONSUL BELFAST
AMCONSUL EDINBURGH

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E. O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PINT, PGOV, UK
SUBJECT: BY-ELECTION OUTLOOK

SUMMARY: THERE ARE CURRENTLY FOUR VACANT SEATS IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS -- THREE LABOR AND ONE CONSERVATIVE -- AND TWO OF THEM ARE SCHEDULED TO BE FILLED IN APRIL BY-ELECTIONS AND THE THIRD IS EXPECTED TO BE ANNOUNCED SHORTLY. OF THESE UPCOMING BY-ELECTIONS, THE TORIES ARE EXPECTED TO HOLD THEIR ONE "SAFE" SEAT EASILY, WHILE LABOR COULD LOSE BOTH ITS SEATS, BUT ONLY IF THERE ARE VERY LARGE DEFECTIONS AMONG TRADITIONAL LABOR VOTERS. THE LOSS OF EITHER SEAT, HOWEVER, WOULD WEAKEN CALLAGHAN'S PARLIAMENTARY POSITION AND INCREASE HIS DEPENDENCE ON THE LIBERALS. BUT SUCH LOSSES WOULD HAVE LITTLE PRACTICAL SIGNIFICANCE IN THE NEAR TERM. END SUMMARY.

1. FOUR COMMONS SEATS -- ONE TORY AND THREE LABOR -- ARE CURRENTLY VACANT DUE TO THE DEATH OF THE INCUMBENT MP. THE VACANCIES ARE: WYCOMBE, A "SAFE" CONSERVATIVE CONSTITUENCY; LAMBETH CENTRAL, AN IMMIGRANT-IMPACTED
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CENTRAL LONDON SEAT WITH A LARGE LABOR MAJORITY; GLASGOW GARSADDEN, A TRADITIONAL LABOR SEAT UNDER STRONG SCOTTISH NATIONALIST CHALLENGE; AND HAMILTON, ANOTHER TRADITIONAL LABOR SEAT IN SCOTLAND, BUT ONE WHICH WAS WON BY THE SCOTTISH NATIONAL PARTY (SNP) IN A 1967 BY-ELECTION. BY-ELECTIONS IN THE LAMBETH AND GLASGOW CONSTITUENCIES ARE SCHEDULED ON APRIL 20 AND APRIL 13, RESPECTIVELY, AND

THAT IN WYCOMBE IS EXPECTED TO BE ANNOUNCED WITHIN THE
NEXT FEW WEEKS.

2. CURRENTLY, THE GOVERNMENT HAS ONLY 305 SEATS IN
PARLIAMENT (EXCLUDING NON-VOTING MPS), 11 SHORT OF AN
OVERALL MAJORITY. BUT LABOR STILL HAS A LEAD OF 24
OVER THE CONSERVATIVE OPPOSITION. WITH THE SUPPORT OF
LIBERAL AND OTHER MPS, CALLAGHAN CAN CONTINUE TO COUNT
ON AN OVERALL MAJORITY REGARDLESS OF HOW THESE BY-
ELECTIONS TURN OUT.

3. CURRENTLY, THE CONSERVATIVES ARE REGARDED A VIRTUAL
CERTAINTY TO RETAIN THE WYCOMBE SEAT. SIMILARLY, LABOR
IS EXPECTED TO HOLD LAMBETH, ALBEIT BY A REDUCED MARGIN,
AS THE TORIES WOULD NEED A 17 PERCENT SWING IN THEIR
FAVOR TO WIN. THIS CONTEST, HOWEVER, IS OF SOME INTERES
BECAUSE APPROXIMATELY 20 PERCENT OF THE ELECTORATE IS
BLACK OR ASIAN. IMMIGRATION AND RACISM ARE CERTAIN TO
BE ISSUES AND COULD AFFECT THE OUTCOME. GLASGOW
GARSCADDEN IS THE MOST INTERESTING OF THE THREE CONTESTS
AS IT IS THE FIRST BY-ELECTION IN SCOTLAND SINCE THE
OCTOBER 1974 GENERAL ELECTION AND WILL BE AN IMPORTANT
TEST OF VOTER ATTITUDES TOWARD THE GOVERNMENT AND THE
SNP. WE WILL REPORT SEPARATELY ON THIS BY-ELECTION.
OUR SOUNDINGS OF LABOR PARTY OFFICIALS INDICATE THAT THE
GOVERNMENT WILL NOT CALL A BY-ELECTION IN HAMILTON BEFOR
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THE SUMMER RECESS. THEY BELIEVE THE SNP CANDIDATE, THE
ARTICULATE AND POPULAR MARGO MACDONALD, WOULD WIN FAIRLY

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INR-10 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15
ICA-11 OMB-01 TRSE-00 /080 W
-----020273 061757Z /42

R 061731Z APR 78
FM AMEMBASSY LONDON
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4876
INFO AMCONSUL BELFAST
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EASILY AND THEREFORE PREFER THE VACANCY TO LOSING THE SEAT TO THE SNP. AN SNP VICTORY IN THAT CONSTITUENCY, ESPECIALLY IF COUPLED WITH ANOTHER SNP WIN IN GARSCADDEN WOULD GIVE THE NATIONALISTS AN IMPORTANT PSYCHOLOGICAL BOOST IN THE RUN-UP TO A FALL GENERAL ELECTION. IF, HOWEVER, CALLAGHAN SHOULD DECIDE NOT TO GO TO THE POLLS IN THE FALL, WE WOULD EXPECT A FALL BY-ELECTION IN HAMILTON.

4. COMMENT: THE WYCOMBE AND LAMBETH BY-ELECTIONS ARE OF NO SPECIAL SIGNIFICANCE, AND BOTH SEATS SHOULD BE HELD BY THE INCUMBENT PARTY. IF LABOR SHOULD LOSE THE LATTER SEAT -- WHICH IS UNLIKELY, BUT POSSIBLE -- IT WOULD HAVE TO BE REGARDED AS A SERIOUS, BUT NOT NECESSARILY IRREPARABLE, SETBACK. LABOR SEEMS FAR MORE VULNERABLE IN GARSCADDEN, BUT EVEN THERE IS CURRENTLY FAVORED TO RETAIN THE SEAT. THE LOSS OF EITHER OF THESE SEATS WOULD INCREASE THE GOVERNMENT'S PARLIAMENTARY DEFICIT, MAKING IT SLIGHTLY MORE DEPENDENT ON LIBERAL SUPPORT (THE OTHER POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS OF A LOSS IN LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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GARSCADDEN WILL BE DISCUSSED IN SEPTTEL). ALTHOUGH THE GOVERNMENT'S RELUCTANCE TO MOVE FOR A BY-ELECTION IN HAMILTON IS A TACIT ADMISSION OF VULNERABILITY, IT IS NOT UNPRECEDENTED AND APPEARS TO BE SOUND POLITICS.

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: Z
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: LABOR, ELECTION FORECASTS, POLITICAL PARTIES
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 06 apr 1978
Decaption Date: 20 Mar 2014
Decaption Note: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978LONDON05397
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: N/A
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780150-0043
Format: TEL
From: LONDON
Handling Restrictions:
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t19780486/aaaacuza.tel
Line Count: 159
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: b2905cb5-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION EUR
Original Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Original Handling Restrictions: ONLY
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Previous Handling Restrictions: ONLY
Reference: n/a
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 05 may 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: N/A
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 3056129
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: BY-ELECTION OUTLOOK SUMMARY: THERE ARE CURRENTLY FOUR VACANT SEATS IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS -- THREE LABOR AND ONE CONSERVATI
TAGS: PINT, PGOV, UK
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/b2905cb5-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014